



The Directions of Space According to Sufism (I)

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1. Introduction

Sufism (*tasawwuf*) constitutes the metaphysical, inward (*bātin*) aspect of Islam. While its exterior (*zāhir*) complement deals with the social and legislative matters of the Muslim world, therefore constituting what is called the “great way” (*shari`ah*), Sufism stands for the *haqīqah* or “the inner truth”. Symbolically, the two complements of the Islamic tradition are to each other the same as a kernel (*lubb*) is to its shell (*qishr*). It must be noted that this complementary distinction is not a matter of external legislation, that is, of civil convention, but an effect of what could be called “the natural order of things”. In view of that, the interiority of Sufism, together with all the consequences and effects of such a quality, is seen as an *organic reality* that could never be reversed or violated in any way, since it is the very principle around which the very body of the community and of the individual exists and through which life is sustained. The conjectural denial of the two complements’ specific situation within the relation is understood as being an error of judgment, and this could never affect the reality of the natural order of things, in the same way in which a kernel could never be without and the shell within or in the same way in which there could never be a shell without its implicit kernel. Also, it is important to notice that one couldn’t properly speak of “Sufi organizations” and so much the less of “Sufi individuals”. Because Sufism designates an inner reality, it has nothing in common with such exterior garments and it cannot be defined by them. Whether they are of a social or of a psychological order (that is, an organization or an individual), they constitute only a cover, but their relation with the *tasawwuf* is hierarchical, the latter being superior to the former. *Haqīqah*’s superiority to *shari`ah* is the same as, for example, the point is to the space.

Sufism includes the metaphysical doctrine whence cosmological reflections derive from, and the metaphysical way (*tarīqah*), the method (Gr. *meta hodos*), by means of which the return from the circumference (*muhīt*) to the centre (*qutb*) or from *shari`ah* to *haqīqah* is possible.¹ Geometrically, the *tarīqah* is symbolized by the radius of a circle. The cosmological sciences, as it has been mentioned, derive their knowledge from the

¹ Geometrically speaking, the radius springs from the center and this is how the circle is born. Therefore, when reaching the *qutb*, the *mutasawwuf*, becoming thus a veritable Sufi, makes the way back along the radius to the *muhīt*, and revivifies the *shari`ah*.

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application of the metaphysical principles into the different orders of reality and, most importantly, they function according to the *law of analogy* upon which all symbolism founds its efficiency. So, any cosmological science, which by its own very nature constitutes the passage from *muhīt* to *qutb*, gives form to a particular and specific *tarīqah*, and since the cosmological sciences are as many as the orders of reality, and since each such science can be approached from various degrees of understanding, it is a logical outcome that Sufism acknowledges various methods for returning to the metaphysical reality. It should be mentioned that if a cosmological science may be approached from various perspectives, all these perspectives, in order to remain on the path and be thus faithful to the *tarīqah* they belong to, must be in perfect accordance with the teachings of the Prophet, who is the direct representation of the *Qutb*, and that is, with the *Qur`ān*. Therefore, in the cosmological domain we have, on the one hand, as many cosmological sciences as orders of reality exist and, on the other hand, each cosmological science may include multiple perspectives, but each of them, in order to be orthodox, must be in perfect coherence with the teachings of the Mohammedan Revelation. The possibility of such a plurality within one single Muslim tradition derives exactly from the principled complementarity between *shari`ah* and *haqīqah*, and a *mutasawwuf* (the disciple initiated on a particular *tarīqah*), depending on his degree of understanding, has a point of view which can be closer either to the *shari`ah* or to the *haqīqah*. Now we should only note, without insisting on it, that an individual becomes a *mutasawwuf*, that is, one who has entered a *tarīqah*, exclusively by means of receiving a spiritual influence (*baraqah*) from a spiritual master (*murshid*). And this tradition of *baraqah* from master to disciple forms a spiritual chain (*silsilah*) that has its origin in the Prophet himself, which is what properly constitutes and gives reality to a *tarīqah*. Each *tarīqah* springs from the *qutb* (the center) and ends in one point of the *muhīt* (the circumference). Each point of this radius stands for a particular understanding of the Holy Writ, which is the *Qur`ān*. The closer a point is to the circumference, the more outward is the understanding that it represents and the more sharpened are the oppositions and the contradictions with all other equivalent perspectives situated on the same peripheral circle.² It should be noted here that, as René Guénon remarked, any battlefield is a *common ground*. Therefore, divergent points situate at the same peripheral distance from the centre, and they express through their divergence the centrifugal movement from center to periphery. Converging points are activated by a centripetal movement, and thus their activity is concentrated towards the pursuit of the direction indicated by each one's own *tarīqah*. If we are to transpose this description to the three-dimensional geometry, we should say that in order for two points to clash their swords, they must belong to the same plane, having thus a horizontal movement (*al-haraka al-ufuqiyya*) of amplitude. But if they are to transcend the horizontal opposition, they must be activated by a vertical movement (rectilinear movement, *al-haraka al-mustaqīma*) of exaltation, which will transport them from base to top.³ In the three-dimensional illustration, the circle gives way to a cone. Thus, we will use the concept of *equivalence* when we speak of a horizontal relation between two

² However, it has to be noticed that once entered on a *tarīqah*, even though still far from the center, the war carried by the *mutasawwuf* is strictly and exclusively of an interior nature, being thus in the most proper sense *al-jihad al-akhbar* (the Greater Holy War).

³ This rectilinear movement is the strait way (*as-sirāt al-mustaqīm*) mentioned in the *Surat al-Fātiha*.

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points, while the concept of *analogy* will be used when we are referring to a vertical relation between points situated in parallel horizontal planes hierarchically different.

This description shows how the law of analogy is functioning. It is a law which, as we said before, is the very foundation of the science of symbols, which is, in its turn, nothing else than the general designation of all the cosmological sciences. A cosmological science operates with instruments (symbols) that are meant on the one hand to represent and to apply metaphysical principles within a certain order of reality, and on the other hand to carry and to support the knowledge to a transcendental understanding of reality.⁴

2. The qualified space and the traditional understanding of Geometry

All cosmological sciences are, because of their very symbolical nature, explanations of the metaphysical principles and, therefore, not additions coming from the outside (*zāhir*). They are expositions and clarifications of what, at some point, was no longer understood in its synthetic simplicity and needed, as a result, analytic description and expression, which, nonetheless, always kept its symbolical nature. The reason why it is constantly essential to understand the symbolic intrinsic quality of the traditional cosmological sciences is because never such a science is regarded as an end in itself, but always as a way of applying the metaphysical principles and of re-membering them. Every cosmological science, thus understood, is foremost *qualitative* and only secondary and consequently *quantitative*. These two attributes of any traditional science (that is, of any science benefiting of the *silsilah* of *baraqah*), reflect basically the fundamental distinction between interior (*bātin*) and exterior (*zāhir*), between *haqīqah* and *shari`ah*. The extent of assimilation of the qualitative aspect is directly proportional with the degree of proximity to the *qutb*, while the quantitative aspect dominates when the *mutasawwuf*'s degree of knowledge is closer to periphery, to *muhīt*. The objective of entering a *tariqah* is to travel from a certain degree of quantity to pure quality. If *shari`ah*, the Muslim Law, is the all encompassing circle of Islam, there is where the quantitative aspect of the traditional sciences dominates. But even so, because of the very nature of *shari`ah*, which is that of the exterior cover of *haqīqah*, being thus organically attached to it as a shell to the kernel, the quantity is justly balanced by quality in such extent that the latter is never lost from view, even if not wholly understood.⁵ Another application deriving from this fundamental distinction is that the quantitative aspect of science is the one properly subjected to the whole domain of arts, while the qualitative aspect belongs to the contemplative existence, to the traditional science. The Christian medieval dictum expressed by the French architect Jean Mignot in 1398, while building the Milan Cathedral, *ars sine scientia nihil est*, reflects and expresses exactly the same view of things, being its equivalent expression. The relation between art, or the quantitative aspect, and science, the qualitative one, is of an analogical nature. This

⁴ For a more detailed introduction to Sufism, see René Guénon, *Insights to Islamic esoterism and Taoism*, Sophia Perennis, 2003 and Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi doctrine*, World Wisdom, 2008.

⁵ It could be said that if the "Great Way" (*shari`ah*) is a circular movement, that is, neither centrifugal, nor centripetal, the narrow way, represented by a *tariqah*, is a direct assault of the interior citadel, being therefore a centripetal spiral movement.

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means that art symbolizes science, the traditional cosmological science which, in its turn, symbolizes the metaphysical reality.

And since sciences in themselves are but symbolical expressions of the different orders of reality, it follows that each such order (Gr. *kosmos*) possesses intrinsically a qualitative and a quantitative aspect. If we consider geometry, the science of space measuring, accordingly to what has been presented up to this point, it should be said that it has both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect, and so does space since it is the reality translated by this science to the human reason.

Architecture is the most direct application of the science of geometry, both being linked so closely that, as Guénon remarks, in Arabic they share the same name: *hindesah*, a word whose primary meaning is *measure*.⁶ Architecture is, according to what has been said, the art of the science of geometry or, in the words of the *Ikhwān al-Safā`* (The Brethren of Purity), the practical art (*san`a `amaliyya*), while geometry is, in relation with it, the theoretical art (*san`a `ilmiyya*).⁷ The qualitative aspect of the art of architecture, from a traditional perspective, is given by a qualitative geometry, that is, by a design that is mirroring by means of analogical representation the superior order of reality. The architect himself, as the etymology of the word suggests (Gr. *archi tektos*) is the master builder, which comes to say that he is the one in possession of the qualitative facet of the science of geometry to which the building aspect in itself is only an application and constitutes its quantitative lower aspect. Ibn `Arabī refers to this when he says that a geometer (*muhandis*) is also a carpenter, and when he speaks about the hierarchical relation between the two aspects of the same function.⁸ All of this is just another application of the fundamental distinction between interior (*bātin*) and exterior (*zāhir*). Both geometry and architecture, the latter understood always as an application of the former, in order to fulfill the traditional requirements of quality, have to describe, each in their own order of reality, the *qualified space*. This designation speaks of a notion of space shared by all traditional civilizations, the Islamic one included, which predates the Cartesian theory of space and which contradicts it, as Guénon showed,⁹ by means of the concept of *direction* as the essential qualitative element of space.

On the basis of this essential element, the *direction*, space shares the “nature” of the *haqīqah*, while on the basis of the concept of *measure*, it participates to the nature of *shari`ah*.<sup>10</sup> One of the consequences that could be drawn from this, bearing in mind the superiority of *haqīqah* in relation to *shari`ah*, is that the directions of space dictate borders and, simultaneously, the same directions transcend them. This means that they give form and that they simultaneously transcend this form. To apply this, more

⁶ See Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of Times*, chp. 3, Sophia Perennis, 2001.

⁷ For a more detailed presentation of the teachings of the *Ikhwān al-Safā`*, see Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*, 2005., p. 36 sqq.

⁸ Al-Futūhat al-Makkiyya, 1: 139; apud Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture*, p. 47.

⁹ Guénon, op. cit., chp. 4.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion about the concept of *measure*, see ibidem, chp. 3. But it is worth to mention that measure has a cosmogonical, genetic valence, which appears with clarity when considering, as we had done above, the analogy between *measure* and *shari`ah*, since the latter is nothing else but the exterior manifestation of *haqīqah*. And just the same as *shari`ah* is the external Law, so is the cosmos the manifested Order. And exactly this exteriority is that which gives measure its quantitative nature.

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particularly, to architecture, it means that these directions, represented by geometrical symbolism, dictate the form of a building and, simultaneously, elevate this quantitative element of architecture (form) to its transcendental reality, for which the form is only a symbol. Also, understanding *haqīqah* and *shari`ah* in a more inclusive manner and thus investing these terms with the universality they properly possess, it comes to say that space itself, as a symbol for *shari`ah*, is regulated, thus geometrized, by its intrinsic directions that represent symbolically, in this relation, the *haqīqah* with its *turuq* (plural form of *tarīqah*). However, through these same directions of space, space itself can be transcended to its purely qualitative origin, which is the point.